



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus  
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 30-39)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might find distasteful – especially the behavior of women – could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group. How do those observations (and prescriptions) bear on the present?

### Responsive Prayer

God of creation, we know that we are made in your image, male and female. Yet, too often we have failed to honor the dignity of one another.

**We have valued one gender over another, either by cultural conditioning, bias, or prejudice. We have turned blind eyes to the abuse, the slander, the flippant insult, or the blatant disdain of one gender by the other.**

We have tried to change and control one another. Instead of loving one another, we have feared one another.

**Forgive us and help us, Lord, we pray. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16

### Reflection

"Women's roles in the letters to Timothy and Titus appear troubling at best," Mona LaFosse notes. Women are warned to avoid gossiping, drunkenness, sensual living, braiding their hair, and wearing jewelry. Some idly gad about; others welcome false teachers into their homes. Women are instructed to love their husbands, bear children, manage their households, and not teach or have authority over men. "It is difficult not to see these texts as promoting a patriarchal view of women's roles," she admits.

Yet some women – mothers and grandmothers, older women who instruct younger ones, "real" widows, old widows, a woman who "has widows," and women associated with the role of deacon – have special, honorable roles. How can we unravel this paradox? Two features of ancient Mediterranean culture guide LaFosse's reading of these texts about women's roles – the high value of honor or good reputation, and the system of patronage.

- ▶ *Older and younger women (Titus 2:3-5).* The "fitting" behavior commended here would promote the good reputation of the community (2:5, 8, 10), unlike some others' divergent teachings about the Jewish law on what is clean and unclean (1:10-16; 3:9-11). Gender, class, and age determine how individuals and communities live honorably. The age hierarchy among women reflects an ancient norm – "an older woman [was] often stereotyped either as a hag who could compromise honor through shameful behavior such as gossiping and drunkenness (the two prohibitions listed here), or as an ideal matron who embodied the honor of her family by exemplary virtue," LaFosse explains. In many cultures, older women teach the younger women. Here they also may serve as patrons. "The patron provided financial support, stability, protection, and other benefits; in return, the client was loyal, proclaiming the patron's honor, and providing services when needed."



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- ▶ *Widows and "proper" behavior (1 Timothy 5:3-16)*. Divergent teaching threatens the group's reputation. Thus, proper behavior would serve two ends: "to combat the 'other' teaching that was going on within the community (1:3-7; 4:1-3), and to refute negative views of the group from the perspective of outsiders (3:7; 5:14)." There are "real" widows who are alone and need the community's help (5:5, 16). Some people are not caring for their family members (5:8), either their widowed mothers or grandmothers (5:4) or for younger widows (5:11-15). The latter are idle and being led astray; Paul wants them to assume honorable roles in that culture. LaFosse thinks 5:16 refers to the older women who, as mother, kin, or patron, should be guiding those younger widows. "Perhaps some of the older women, convinced by the 'other' teaching that 'forbade marriage' (4:3), are counseling younger widows against remarriage, despite the young widows' desire to remarry (5:11; cf. 2 Timothy 3:6). Without older women to help them with the process, perhaps the young widows are looking for new husbands themselves, outside of the faith community and the normal channels, and are being perceived as 'gadding about,' she writes. "Perhaps these older women are the ones that the author perceives as 'living luxuriously' (5:6, my translation), and dressing in expensive clothes with braided hair (2:9). Perhaps he harshly condemns them not to teach or have authority over a man (2:11-12) because, in his mind, they are being led astray, and leading others astray."
- ▶ *Women and the deaconate (1 Timothy 3:11)*. "Women" here may refer to the wives of deacons or to female deacons. Recall that one of Paul's patrons, Phoebe, was an honorable woman who is called "deacon" (Romans 16:1). These women are to have traits associated with church leaders, including being "faithful." This word describes the believing (i.e., faithful) woman "who has widows" and should teach them wisely (5:16). LaFosse concludes, "Thus, there were important roles for women in the community, if they embraced and embodied characteristics and behavior consistent with their faith."

### Study Questions

1. Why does Mona LaFosse believe that 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Titus 2:3-5 are focused on good reputation and culturally specific moral behavior? Do you think these passages are too concerned about these things? Or do they commend character traits that are worthwhile for disciples in every age?
2. How have the teachings of the Letters to Timothy and Titus been used to limit women's roles in church life? Why does LaFosse think this an inaccurate application of these texts?
3. How was honor or good reputation important in the ancient Mediterranean world, according to LaFosse? Is it still important to us today? Discuss when a concern for good reputation is helpful in our discipleship, and when it interferes with our following Christ.

Departing Hymn: "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" (verses 1, 2, and 5)

# Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the roles for women in the Letters to Timothy and Titus in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world.
2. To outline the ancient practice of patronage and the concern for honor.
3. To discuss the appropriate role for honor or good reputation in our discipleship.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" either use the tune WEBSTER (Bolin) on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible* or locate the familiar tune STUTTGART in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Background Story

Imagine the life-course of a woman of the non-elite classes in the ancient Mediterranean world. We know that she would be "educated primarily in household duties by her mother and other female kin" and "expected to marry a man of her parents' choosing in her late teen years," Mona LaFosse explains. "Her husband was often five to ten years her elder. In the urban centers of the Roman Empire, a young bride most likely lived near to her natal kin" and the couple's property "legally belonged to her first family rather than the family into which she married."

Life expectancy was so dismal that probably half of her children would die before age ten and her parents would die sometime in her twenties or thirties. When her husband died, if she was still of childbearing age, she was expected to remarry; otherwise she would remain alone and hope to support herself or receive support from her adult children.

Suppose she was blessed to see her children live to adulthood and start families. "It was this stage of her life, in her late forties and fifties, beyond childbearing and childrearing and having cultivated her reputation, that she commanded the most respect from her family and possessed the most social power within her life course," LaFosse notes. "Since the household was the site of early Christian gatherings, women must have played increasingly important roles as they aged, for the household was the domain of women."

## Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In the first study guide, "Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture," we saw the value of canonical criticism in interpreting biblical texts about women's roles. In this study Mona LaFosse illustrates a different

method, though it is consistent with the canonical perspective. She gives a close reading of key passages in the Letters to Timothy and Titus in light of two social-cultural practices of the ancient Mediterranean world – the practice of patronage and the concern for honor or good reputation. Encourage members to use this socio-cultural critical method not to shove the instructions on women’s roles “back into history,” but to explore a more accurate application of these teachings to our cultural context.

### *Study Questions*

1. Mona LaFosse calls attention to several passages in each letter that explicitly refer to preserving the honor or good reputation of the community: 1 Timothy 3:7 and 5:14; and Titus 2:5, 8, 10. The proper behaviors listed for older men (Titus 2:2), older women and younger women (2:3-5), younger men (2:6), and slaves (2:9-10) contain many instances of culturally specific moral behaviors.

LaFosse concludes, “Although [the writer of these letters] is anxious about reputation and culturally specific moral behavior, he also commends individuals who cultivate reputable attributes such as steadfastness, integrity, and faithfulness. Such character, rooted in faith and tied into the responsibilities of each stage of the life course, promote behavior pleasing to God and fruitful for the community. Perhaps this view of reputation, whatever our age and gender, is worthwhile in our various roles in family, Church, and society.”

2. Some interpreters think these letters restrict all women to certain household roles (cf. 1 Timothy 5:14; Titus 2:4-5) and prohibit them from teaching generally or in the church (1 Timothy 2:12). Some think 1 Timothy 3:11 refers only to deacon’s wives, and thus prevents women from serving as deacons.

LaFosse suggests that in light of Paul’s practice, 1 Timothy 3:11 probably refers to women deacons. Women are given other important leadership roles in these letters. She writes, “Given the importance of ‘teaching’ in Titus, the fact that the author highlights older women as ‘teachers of what is excellent’ (all one word in Greek, *kalodidaskaloi*) is noteworthy.”

The passages that seem more restrictive of women’s roles, LaFosse argues, are not teachings for all women. Either they refer to specific problems in these communities – e.g., the older women who are being misled by divergent teachings and (therefore?) are shirking their duties to mentor younger widows – or they echo first-century cultural norms that were to be respected at the time in order to preserve the good reputation of the community.

3. “Honor was a pivotal cultural value in the ancient Mediterranean,” LaFosse writes. “The group, especially the family, counted more than the individual. Honor represented the reputation of a person and the person’s family, especially as it was measured against and perceived by other families or individuals. Women and men had different roles in this system. Generally speaking, men were expected to defend family honor in the face of public challenges or threats; women were expected to embody family honor by their modest, chaste, and submissive behavior. Honorable behavior was expected of all family members in order for the household to remain honorable in the eyes of others.”

Though the standards of honor have changed over the years, we are still concerned with reputation. She writes, “We make mental note of public figures and of businesses with questionable reputations. We gossip about families, often judging them by the behavior of the women and children (for example, who is commonly blamed for an unruly child in the grocery store or for an unkempt house?).... Advertising and the self-help industry are insidious aspects of Western culture that promote, or even dictate, social norms for women (and men). They promote anxiety about reputation and social standing, with the hope of converting this anxiety into consumption.”

Invite members to give some examples of a healthy concern for reputation, because it allows us to care for our neighbors and make a winsome presentation of the gospel to them. Then consider some examples of our being too concerned about our reputation in ways that deflect us from being faithful followers of Christ.

### *Departing Hymn*

“Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey” is on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.